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THE ORANGE ORB: LESSONS BETWEEN BITES AND LETTERS

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The first time I gave Marco a "kwek-kwek", he gave me a look as though I was out of my wits.

I was making worksheets, using scissors, and creating flashcards at the corner of the rustic, retireable wooden classroom table. The rain pocked patiently against the leaking window and followed in thin streaks along its lines. Aged 9, third grade, unable to read a single three-letter word. The room feels cold, airy, and silent for a long pause.

"I... I do not want it, he said, and looked at the orange batter as though it were going to bite.

"You might," I said. "But you don't have to eat it yet."

It was absurd, really. Street food as pedagogy! But I had heard something of children who live in silence: that they are first responsive to meaningful gestures that make sense of the world. And occasionally, nothing makes sense as quickly as food.

I put one small, one small kwek-kwek on his desk. Just one. The smoke of the newly fried batter was like smoldering peace.

He glanced up. Just once.

That was enough.

Marco had been sitting for weeks with his head low and was evading the letters, the sounds, the stare of forty-two pairs of eyes. Every policymaker adores inclusion; it is a good-sounding name. However, practically, it was only myself, a broken window, a fan scratching into the air over it, and the certainty that this youngster had been taught invisibility more successfully than reading.

I started to leave him a kwek-kwek on his desk. No fanfare. No speeches. Only a dark-orange ball peered over his notebook. At other times, he chewed it and gazed at the paper. Sometimes he did not. He gazed at me instead, sometimes measuring whether I would leave him alone. Slowly, it became a ritual. The kwek-kwek was a promise: *I see you; you are safe here.*

One day, I wrote on a piece of paper three letters: c -a-t.

I pushed it towards him and paired a kwek-kwek.

He looked at the letters. He looked at the snack. His hand hovered over both. The room was still. The rain had ceased outside, so the air was damp.

Finally, he slowly whispered: "C..."

"C," I said gently.

"A..."

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"Ah."

"T."

The little word shook in between us.

"Cat," he breathed.

And the first time, he hurriedly grabbed the kwek-kwek!

The room contains forty-two chairs. Only one teacher. And one bridge of small fried egg and batter.

The clear reality, the so-called reading specialist is absent. The kind of assistive technology I have is absent. Nevertheless, I possess little magic, a human ritual that allows learning.

Now and then, the cracking in the window appears to widen to the point of dividing the classroom in silence and terror. There are days when the fan does not switch equally, and my head hurts as I attempt to separate myself into forty-two equal parts.

But the kwek-kwek is patient. It does not matter whether he's scrambling the word. It does not laugh; should he freeze? Instead, it is ready, warm, and sunny, waiting for him to receive it, to believe, to make another attempt.

After the third week, he read aloud before the rest of the class. Slowly. Haltingly. But he did it!

C-a-t....

"Cat!"

Again, I had a kwek-kwek on the end of his table.

He did not eat it then. Not yet. He had to learn to stand first. Nevertheless, the gesture was not in vain.

Marco is still learning. There is still this crack in the window. The lights still flicker. There are still forty-two chairs in the room and one teacher. The system has not changed.

But something has.

And now, when he comes to the sight of the little orange kwek-kwek next to his notebook, he does not lower his head. The first thing he reaches is the pencil. The word can yet shake upon his tongue, but it comes.

But then something occurs to Room 14 as he always sees the small orange orbs lying on his notebook. The room softens. The air shifts.

It says: *I am here! You are safe. You belong.*

And sometimes, when the room seems crowded enough and the day seems too long, all that is left to do is hope that faith and trust may start with a small orange kwek-kwek, and wait.....

Bit by bit.

Sound by sound.

Syllable after syllable.

The child starts reading.

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